SJT 69(2): 140–154 (2016)
doi:10.1017/S0036930616000028

Crux probat omnia: Rowan Williams' scriptural hermeneutic

Derek W. Taylor
Duke Divinity School, 407 Chapel Drive, Durham, NC 27708, USA
derek.william.taylor@gmail.com

Abstract

Although Rowan Williams is widely recognised as one of today's leading theologians, comparatively little attention has been paid to his scriptural hermeneutic, and much of what has been written has been critical of the role scripture plays in his theology. This article explores Williams' biblical hermeneutic in light of the criticism of John Webster in particular. It is argued that for Williams a good reading of scripture must be at once critical, analogical, and christological. While this last characteristic is often overlooked by his critics, Williams' emphasis on the risen Christ's ongoing presence in the church, and on the specifically cruciform nature of that presence, is determinative for his hermeneutic.

Keywords: christology, cruciform, hermeneutics, John Webster, Rowan Williams, scripture

This paper has three goals. The first of these is to highlight Rowan Williams' scriptural hermeneutic. Williams is certainly one of today's most creative and diverse theologians, at once a pastor, poet, historian and literary critic, and none of these superficially. But a glance at his work might reveal a certain lacuna. Does he treat scripture with the same care as other classical texts? Amidst a growing body of secondary literature analysing Williams' work, this paper seeks to touch on this oft-ignored dimension of his thinking.[1] Those who have dealt with Williams' treatment of scripture have often done so critically, usually from a classically Protestant or evangelical perspective, and often questioning his reluctance to grant scripture a distinctly central role in the church's life and language. Secondly, then, this paper seeks to engage John Webster, perhaps the most prominent of

[1] While enjoyable, learned, and otherwise quite thorough, Benjamin Myers' recent work, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: T&T Clark, 2012) makes virtually no reference to Williams as a reader of scripture. Likewise the works in Matheson Russell (ed.), *On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009) contain no sustained analysis of Williams' scriptural hermeneutic. Mike Higton's *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: SCM Press, 2004) is a slight exception; see his brief analysis on pp. 62–8 of that work.

these critics, and one who has worked to centralise scripture as consistently and profoundly as any contemporary theologian.[2] After comparing Williams and Webster, this paper will, thirdly, draw some conclusions that I hope will deepen and complicate current discussions about theological interpretation by calling to mind the distinctly *theological* aspects of hermeneutical commitments.

This paper will begin with Williams' hermeneutic, claiming that for Williams a good reading must be (1) critical, (2) analogical and (3) christological. The first two aspects are most easily noticed in his writing, and therefore elicit the most critical response. But by failing to appreciate the christological nature of his thought, and the distinct shape of this christology, critics have failed to account fully for Williams' hermeneutic. Like his more evangelical critics, Williams indeed speaks of the gracious presence and action of the resurrected Christ. Yet more consistently than they, Williams emphasises the *cruciform* nature of Christ's presence. This decisively shapes the dynamics of his hermeneutic. Thus while on one level this is a discussion about hermeneutics and the authority of scripture in the life of the church, the deeper and more central issue regards the nature of the God who works in and through the scriptural texts.

Williams' critical hermeneutic

According to Williams, the church must read scripture carefully and critically, with the tools and methods that exegesis of an ancient text requires.[3] At first glance this might seem obvious, but in fact Williams' advocacy for the *sensus literalis* is something of a rebellion. In contrast to recent interpretive fads that elevate spiritual or allegorical tools, Williams suggests a more patient,

[2] For Webster on Williams see 'Rowan Williams on Scripture', in Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance (eds), *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), pp. 105–24. See also Bockmuehl's critically appreciative engagement with Williams in his *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), pp. 82–6; and Bockmuehl's comments on Williams in 'Reason, Wisdom and the Implied Discipline of Scripture', in David F. Ford and Graham Stanton (eds), *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 59–60. More recently, Darren Sarisky, *Scriptural Interpretation: A Theological Exploration* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013) offers two chapters of analysis on Williams as a reader of scripture, largely in the tone of his teacher, John Webster (see n. 18 below).

[3] See Rowan Williams, 'Historical Criticism and Sacred Text', in David Ford and Graham Stanton (eds), *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 217–28; 'The Discipline of Scripture', in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 44–59.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930616000028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

plain-sense approach. The patience that critical tools require operates like a brake for interpretive strategies that seek immediacy, strategies which assume the right hermeneutical key or interpretive stance will turn an otherwise difficult text into a transparent purveyor of theological meaning.

For Williams, the interpreter cannot ignore the fact that the canon 'proclaims unambiguously its own "produced" character'.[4] The written text is 'not a synchronic "surface" of isolated acts of communication' but one in which 'the component parts are in relation with each other, making sense of each other'.[5] Williams therefore advocates a 'diachronic' approach, in which the interpreter follows the contours of the text and engages the interrelationships between the textual components.[6] Williams seeks to discover where the authors disagree, where they stretch and amend earlier texts, where the humanness of their witness becomes clear.

Likewise, critical tools are necessary because creaturely texts are always produced by historical forces, most notably the socio-historical conditions within which a text is embedded and the authorial intentions that ostensibly give rise to it. To understand a given text – holy or otherwise – Williams avers that one must first identify these influences.

Having done so, however, the interpreter has not thereby uncovered textual meaning, for methods which anchor meaning in the past can be as reductionistic as those which spiritualise the text. Instead, meaning arises as textual 'excess', as the 'something more' of the text that emerges from but finally eludes its ideological and authorial conditionality. 'Critical work crucially exposes for us, in greater richness than in a pre-critical age, the specific tensions and constraints ... which constitute [the text's] "difference".'[7] To appreciate the particularity of a text is to recognise the sense in which it exceeds one's grasp.

Put another way, for Williams the texts of scripture evidence an 'intra-textual strain', a tension or unsettledness that pushes beyond the text itself. Critical reading reveals that the canon is the product of a historical process of reinterpreting. Far from being a finished textual product, the canon is itself a process of confrontation and elaboration, and a good critical reading looks to make this confrontation acute, thereby inviting further elaboration and dialogue.

[4] Williams, 'Historical Criticism and Sacred Text', p. 221.
[5] Rowan Williams, 'The Bible Today: Reading and Hearing', The Larkin-Stuart Lecture, 16 Apr. 2007. www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2112 (accessed Apr. 2013).
[6] For Williams' diachronic approach, see 'The Discipline of Scripture'.
[7] Williams, 'Historical Criticism and Sacred Text', p. 228.

Williams' analogical hermeneutic

Critically uncovering the trajectory within the canon itself calls for a second skill: the ability to make analogical connections between scripture's texts and one's own inhabited world.[8] Good reading requires one not simply to identify the dialogues in the text, but to participate in them. According to Williams, critical attention to the texts and their historical location reveals that the very process of the New Testament's formation was itself the creation of a world. By following the contours of the text, the interpreter is able to ask 'how the movement, the transition, worked within the text is to be realised in the contemporary reading community'.[9] The dialogic space between an author and his holy texts or between an author and other authors provides space for the church's contemporary efforts to continue forward with the story.

Williams continues: 'My aim in reading is not to find instructions but to open myself to "God's world" – to the landscape of God's action and the rhythms of life lived in God's presence.'[10] Scripture read well becomes a narrative structure in which the church can locate itself and 'a paradigm of the "saving" process'.[11]

Likewise, scripture provides the church a sense of identity and integrity through time. This story tells the church now that it is the same community it was then.[12] At the heart of Williams' scriptural imagination is the sense that this ancient, distant and strange story is, most fundamentally, the story within which the church lives today. When the community gathers around these texts (and this table), it gathers to be told who it is.[13] When this happens, the church lives here and now in fellowship with saints of old: 'In the Sunday congregation, Abraham, Moses, Ezekiel and the rest stand invisibly beside us.'[14]

[8] See esp. 'The Discipline of Scripture', p. 52.

[9] Williams, 'The Bible Today'. For example, the Apostle Paul's argument in Romans 1–2 seeks to facilitate a certain movement within the reading community: 'The change envisaged is from confidence in having received divine revelation to an awareness of universal sinfulness and need.'

[10] ed. Michael Ipgrave (ed.), *Scriptures in Dialogue: Christians and Muslims Studying the Bible and Qu'ran Together* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), p. 21.

[11] Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1982), p. 49.

[12] See Williams, 'The Bible', p. 90.

[13] Key to Williams' analogical reading of scripture is the sense in which the eucharistic celebration, along with the scriptural texts, tells a story into which participants are invited. Williams would surely suggest that one without the other is inadequate.

[14] Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 121.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930616000028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Webster's critique

Before turning to consider the third major characteristic of Williams' interpretation, we should pause to consider John Webster, for much of Webster's worry relates to the two hermeneutical skills mentioned above. He raises three general concerns.

First, and most significantly, Webster worries that in Williams' writing on scripture divine agency is sometimes 'so retired as to be scarcely visible'.[15] He continues by noting the 'slenderness of Jesus' agency' in the process of church's knowing and following him.[16] Williams' hermeneutic places strong emphasis on readerly agency (whether critical or analogical) and even on textual agency (in presenting the church a framework and incorporating the church into its story) but what role, precisely, does God play in all of this?

Webster further notes that Williams sees no need to choose between 'divine revelatory causality' and 'material-cultural processes'.[17] For Webster, to emphasise these cultural processes calls into question divine intentionality. Webster believes that Williams' emphasis on 'the polyphony, conflict, and incoherence within the canon' means that his account of scripture loses the sense in which God intends things with the text, the sense in which the text is God's instrument in the divine economy.[18]

Williams' apparent reluctance to talk directly about the action of God vis-à-vis scripture is closely tied to a second of Webster's concerns: Williams' reluctance to utilise traditional concepts like inspiration, illumination and canon.[19] For Webster, the purpose of the canon (and a doctrine of scriptural sufficiency that accompanies it) 'is to restrict indeterminacy or, perhaps better, to indicate ... the place where [the gospel] might be expected'.[20]

[15] Webster, 'Rowan Williams on Scripture', p. 120.

[16] Ibid., p. 122.

[17] Ibid., p. 120.

[18] Darren Sarisky has recently argued in a similar vein, claiming that Williams' conception of scripture betrays a 'certain vagueness in the doctrine of God' and that Williams is relatedly 'skittish about applying theological categories to depict the way things really are' (*Scriptural Interpretation*, pp. 170, 34). Sarisky notes that 'Christ is primarily an interrogative presence for Williams, not a commanding one' (p. 168). He concludes, 'what holds the text together is more readerly response than it is robust theological description. This is the upshot of Scripture's unity being diachronic rather than synchronic' (p. 170). In this, Sarisky claims, Williams 'makes the Bible seem too much like other texts' (p. 171). Part of Sarisky's own project is to suggest that both diachronic and synchronic approaches to the text can coexist within the same theological hermeneutic, and that an operative doctrine of providence (which Williams allegedly lacks) allows for this coexistence.

[19] Webster, 'Rowan Williams on Scripture', p. 113.

[20] Ibid., p. 122.

Insofar as Williams looses scripture from divine intentionality and from the traditional theological means by which the church safeguards its priority, Webster wonders how scriptural exegesis can positively fund Williams' theology.

Webster fears, thirdly, that an ambiguous account of divine agency and an indeterminate canonical text call into question the reality of Christ's current ascended and exalted state, his subsequent fulfilment of his prophetic office, and the sense in which the ascended Christ has gifted the church with the Holy Spirit.[21] He likewise sees in Williams a tendency to defer God's voice to the eschaton rather than granting it prominence in the church's current life, a prominence that he believes a more robust account of the Spirit's activity would establish.

These areas of alleged deficiency in Williams are places where Webster himself speaks with great clarity. Webster's recent biblical and hermeneutical work reads like a sustained fight against scripture's 'dogmatic mislocation'.[22] In a theological culture that readily grounds scripture's efficacy in cultural poetics or ecclesiology, Webster fights to relocate scripture within the doctrine of God.[23] More specifically, Webster seeks to show how 'the nature of Scripture is a function of its appointment as herald of the self-communicative presence of the risen one'.[24] For Webster, the church can't speak of hermeneutics until it first speaks of scriptural ontology, and it can't do this until it first speaks of the risen and communicative Christ. In this sense, Webster considers much of his christological work to be an exercise in 'negative ecclesiology', in which he attempts to win back to Christ territory which has been annexed by recent accounts of the action of the church.[25] To do so Webster emphasises that Jesus is presently operative and communicative and that 'Scripture is the *viva vox Christi*'.[26]

Given the priority of the exalted Christ who speaks his word perspicuously through the canonical texts, Webster characterises the proper readerly stance towards scripture as one of 'passive activity'.[27] 'Faithful interpretation is ascetic; it involves a disappointment of interpretation, a *being formed*, receiving rather than bestowing meaning'.[28] Webster certainly doesn't advocate for an

[21] Ibid.
[22] John Webster, *Word and Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), pp. 9–10.
[23] In this regard, see John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), particularly the first chapter, 'Revelation, Sanctification and Inspiration', pp. 5–41.
[24] John Webster, *Domain of the Word* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), p. 32.
[25] Webster, *Word and Church*, pp. 2–4.
[26] Webster, *Domain of the Word*, p. 45.
[27] Webster, *Holy Scripture*, p. 72.
[28] Webster, *Domain of the Word*, p. 24, emphasis original.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930616000028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

abandonment of historical and textual tools, but he does insist that the reader who uses these tools is always *produced* rather than *producing*.[29] In the interpretive process God's agency remains initiatory rather than consequent.[30] 'The Bible, its readers and their work of interpretation have their place in the domain of the Word of God, the sphere of reality in which Christ glorified is present and speaks with unrivaled clarity.'[31]

For Webster, modern scriptural pathologies correspond to an unbalanced emphasis on the order of creation and 'an unease about making much of the distinction between created and uncreated being'.[32] Likewise, he believes that modern and late modern hermeneutics privilege the biblical economy, yet display a reluctance to trace the aspects of the economy 'to their cause in the fullness of God's own life'.[33] Webster claims that this 'naturalisation' of the biblical text is a corollary of the naturalisation or historicisation of the church's talk about God. Thus his response to these scriptural and hermeneutical inadequacies is to emphasise 'God's infinitely deep, fully realized life'.[34] In this vein, his recent writings stress divine perfection, aseity, eternality and God's utter distinction from all things creaturely.[35] In short, a classical doctrine of God funds Webster's emphasis on Christ's exaltation over the church, the perfection of Christ's speech, and the clarity of this word as it comes to the church in its canonical form.

Williams' christological hermeneutic

Though Williams' writing doesn't evidence the same intentional concern for systematic clarity as Webster's, his thought nonetheless coheres. Thus I suggest that drawing connections between his doctrine of God and his reading of scripture is a fruitful path to take in attempting to interpret him, and one that will help adjudicate some of the differences between him and Webster. As will soon become clear, only by understanding the importance

[29] Ibid., pp. 27–9.
[30] Ibid., p. 6.
[31] Ibid., p. viii.
[32] Ibid., p. 12.
[33] Ibid., pp. vii–viii.
[34] Ibid., p. xi.
[35] This recent emphasis perhaps stands in somewhat of a contrast to Webster's earlier work on Jüngel and Barth. As examples of Webster's recent writing on the doctrine of God, see 'Life in and of Himself: Reflections on God's Aseity', in Bruce McCormack (ed.), *Engaging the Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), pp. 107–24; 'Webster's Response to Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness*', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62/2 (2009), pp. 202–10; 'Trinity and Creation', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12/1 (Jan. 2010), pp. 4–19; 'Perfection and Participation', in Thomas Joseph White (ed.), *The Analogy of Being* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 379–94.

of the cross for Williams' conception of the divine life, and the notion of divine transcendence that allows the cross to play a central role in this life, can one fully understand his approach to scriptural interpretation.

By claiming that Williams reads christologically, I am not suggesting that he advocates for a christological interpretive agenda to be laid over the text, for this would be an example of the interpretive immediacy he eschews. Instead, Williams' reading is christological in two ways: (1) the drama that the text diachronically narrates (both in its plain sense and its inner textual strain) has its centre at the cross, hence a careful reading leads the interpreter in this direction; and (2) when one arrives at scripture's centre, one can expect to confront the risen Christ. In making himself present, Christ places the interpreter in a new hermeneutical situation and thereby initiates the church's analogical efforts.

Williams' first christological emphasis is particularly on display in his analysis of Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana*.[36] For Augustine, as Williams reads him, a careful reading of scripture reveals the text's 'surface anarchy'. Just as all creaturely objects are to be used in order to move one to the one true object of enjoyment, so too do all signs direct one in a certain direction. In a world of metaphor, Williams claims, only God means nothing but God. But what becomes of one's reading of scripture if the text anarchically defers meaning? According to Williams, the apparent metaphorical messiness of the text converges on the cross. He suggests that if one diachronically follows the literal sense of the text (refusing all fancy hermeneutical shortcuts), one will find that it leads to Golgotha.

Thus Williams elsewhere writes: 'A reading of Scripture that takes place within faith cannot avoid Luther's hermeneutical axiom, *crux probat omnia*'.[37] The importance of this for Williams cannot be overstated. As much as scripture is unfinished and dialogical, it nevertheless possesses a certain coherence, established not by scripture's border (i.e. a canonical coherence) but by its centre. 'At the heart of Scripture the prophetic word does become the incarnate Word. At the heart of Scripture is the fire of God's presence, of God's gift perfectly given and perfectly received in Jesus Christ.'[38]

Of course, reading scripture in light of its centre may sound like simply another instantiation of Williams' general hermeneutic, one in which

[36] Rowan Williams, 'Language, Reality, and Desire in Augustine's *De Doctrina*', *Journal of Literature and Theology* 3/2 (July 1989), pp. 38–50.

[37] Williams, 'The Discipline of Scripture', p. 56. See also his conclusion to 'Word and Spirit' in *On Christian Theology*, p. 127: 'I hope what I have written may suggest some affinities with the hermeneutic expressed by Luther in the words *crux probat omnia*.'

[38] Rowan Williams, 'Reading the Bible', in *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1995), p. 136.

agency remains squarely with the reader. But here the second aspect of his christological reading must be kept in mind. For Williams, the excess of scripture – if one indeed thinks of scripture as *holy* – cannot be separated from the 'excess' of the resurrected Christ. 'Without ceasing to be a particular person in a particular place, he is capable of interpreting an unlimited range of human situations ... there is no place or time or condition in which he is alien.'[39] The excess of scripture and the universality of Christ go hand in hand.

For Williams, then, the critical reader asks how a text is unsettled or opened to the future by God's excessive presence, by the always lingering something more of Christ's grace that no author can pin down. While one may read this as a general theory of textuality, Williams suggests otherwise: theological exegesis does not assume the text's immediate transparency, but 'looks for those ... marks of excess and of intra-textual strain that might have to do not only with immediate ideological context but with God'.[40]

The presence of Christ in scripture's excess also makes sense of Williams' analogical reading, for the risen one makes the story of scripture contemporary to the church. More important than the narrative serving as a paradigm for human thinking is the sense in which readers, by means of the narrative, are placed in dramatic relation with the subject of the story.

This subject is the agent of judgement and grace. Hence a christological reading is also one in which the church allows itself to be put on trial by Christ. Here Williams evidences a similarity to Webster: both appreciate the *passive* aspect of scriptural interpretation. For Williams, readerly agency should be applied both to following scripture to its centre and to making oneself vulnerable to what one finds there. In this, Williams suggests that one should read scripture similarly to the way one 'reads' an icon. 'You need to ... allow yourself to be "worked on" – perhaps we should say, allow yourself to be looked at by God, rather than just looking at something yourself.'[41]

Thus the church reads scripture carefully not in order to explain the text or make it easier, but in order to evoke this encounter by following the text to Christ and by letting itself be seen by him. Unlike readings that seek a revelatory moment of lucidity, Williams encourages the church to read in search of the revelatory moment of crisis, the moment that disrupts one's normal way of being human by placing one next to Christ. Scripture's special

[39] Williams, *Resurrection*, p. 92.

[40] Williams, 'Historical Criticism and Sacred Text', p. 225.

[41] Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with the Icons of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), p. xviii. Williams more explicitly relates icons to scripture on pp. 33–6 of this work.

quality over and against all other texts – Williams calls this its inspiration – is its unique capacity to be the vehicle by which the Spirit creates this presence, its excess grounded in the universality of Christ himself.[42]

In this sense, neither the critical nor the analogical reading Williams suggests stands on its own, for neither makes sense apart from the resurrection. Without the resurrection a critical reading will converge on a centre as ideologically bound to the forces of history as any other text. Without the resurrection the church will analogically read itself into a story merely of its own devising, one that therefore lacks the radical newness and hope only God can provide.

Of course, Webster recognises that Williams allows a place for divine agency in his writing about scripture. Webster's problem is that Williams' writing on this topic lacks clarity, that Williams interweaves divine agency with creaturely modes of operation such that the two cannot be neatly distinguished and thereby properly related. Webster eschews this lack of clarity because it calls into question the absolute priority of God.

Here we reach the point where we can more precisely adjudicate the difference between Williams' theology of scripture and Webster's more traditionally Protestant account. We saw above how Webster's conceptions of divine being and christological perfection cohere with his account of bibliology and hermeneutics. As will become evident below, I suggest that the same holds true for Williams. The key aspect of his thinking that critics underemphasise is the utter centrality of the cross – not merely as a means of atonement, but as the defining event in Jesus' history. Because the Christ who confronts the church has passed through the darkness and silence of Calvary, Williams' account of Christ's resurrected agency will never be as exalted, triumphant or clear as Webster's. By failing to note the cruciform nature of Williams' thought, Webster doesn't frame his critique with as much precision as he could. The key question is not simply whether Christ acts in and through the text, but *who* the Christ is who does so.

Williams' cruciform God

Here Williams follows his teacher, Donald MacKinnon: 'Any exposition of the Christian doctrine of God must first posit the Cross. For Christians, theology is, and must be, a *theologia crucis*.'[43] In Williams' theology nothing is

[42] Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, p. 122.

[43] Donald MacKinnon, *God the Living and the True*, p. 22, quoted by Richard Roberts, 'Theological Rhetoric and Moral Passion in the Light of MacKinnon's Barth', in Kenneth Surin (ed.), *Christ, Ethics, and Tragedy: Essays in Honour of Donald MacKinnon* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), p. 5.

known of God the Trinity that does not begin with the Word incarnate, for Jesus' life is a translation of God's life into earthly form. Jesus is fully God not because his being coincides with divine substance – Williams considers talk of substance to be an abstraction, for no essential core of divine being exists apart from divine works – but because Jesus' works are the fleshly embodiment of God's own life.

Williams recognises that this sort of christological reasoning holds significant implications for the doctrine of God: when the divine life takes worldly form, it dies on a cross. In one sense, the Father abandons Jesus on the cross, which means that the cross marks the point where God appears furthest from the world. Yet in another sense, it is precisely at this point that God is most present, most embodied in Jesus' life. According to the Gospels, Jesus only cries '*Abba*' in Gethsemane; his growing sense of Sonship directly relates to his growing awareness of his human fate. Jesus is most obedient to the Father, most like the Son of God, and therefore most transparent to the divine life, at the point of the crucifixion, the very place where it might appear that the Father is furthest from Jesus. Divine life translated into earthly form takes the shape of seeming God-abandonment.

For Williams this paschal paradox incites trinitarian reflection. On the cross Jesus is both near to the Father (obediently embodying his will) while the Father has abandoned Jesus. The one triune life is able to span this gap and even takes this seeming differentiation up into his own unity-in-plurality.

Here Williams' conception of the triune life diverges from common construals that operate with what he calls a 'two beings' theology, a God-versus-world scheme in which a higher being (God) is ontologically and epistemologically distinguished from a lower being (creation).[44] The central problem driving this model is the question of how God can cross the chasm that separates Creator from creature and thereby make himself known.[45] On Williams' reading this whole scheme is conditioned from the beginning by what he calls 'an uncomplicated and readily available religious conceptual structure' and an 'only partially Christianized view of transcendence'.[46]

Even as Williams is unsatisfied with this common construal of the Trinity, he refuses to offer an explicit alternative, noting that it 'is less easily manageable at the theoretical level',[47] for divine being construed in terms of

[44] See e.g. Rowan Williams, 'Barth on the Triune God', in Mike Higton (ed.), *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), p. 127; Williams, 'Word and Spirit', pp. 110–15.

[45] See Williams, 'Word and Spirit', p. 110.

[46] Ibid., pp. 115, 126.

[47] Ibid., p. 109.

works and history is 'inaccessible to conceptualizing'.[48] Rather than a tidy conception, Williams intends to offer a suggestive question: what would the church's talk about God be like if it were controlled not by an idea of revelation, a model of divine being, or the problem of knowledge, but by a recognition of God's presence in Jesus, even as he hangs on the cross?

As Williams repeatedly emphasises, his model of divine being is 'elusive' and therefore serves to complicate the church's speech. Theology based on a clear above-and-below distinction in being allows language to function neatly; cruciform theology questions ready distinctions and thereby chastens the church's theological language. A model of divine being formed at the foot of the cross avoids systematic shape.

Importantly, the elusiveness of a cruciform doctrine of God need not imply a loss of divine transcendence. On the contrary, Williams' complicating of classically conceived distinction relies upon of a robust affirmation of God's utter transcendence over creation. It is precisely God's wholly otherness that allows God to be present to creation without competing for creation's space. Webster rightly insists that Christian theology must resist collapsing the distinction between created and uncreated being, and Williams couldn't agree more. Unlike many traditional accounts, however, Williams affirms the transcendence of the triune life without resorting to spatial metaphors like divine 'distance'. Instead, he favours something like divine freedom, otherness or strangeness, God's 'unimagineable *differentness*'.[49] The paradoxical presence of God on the cross reveals God to be always more than one's conception of him.

As important as the cross is for Williams, it is not the source of good news without the resurrection. The living Christ confronts the church as the one who has passed through the cross, as the pure victim. Jesus died on the cross precisely because he embodied God's love, precisely because his whole way of being human ran against the grain of the sinful, violent and egocentric ways of the world. Unlike all others who have been caught in this web of sin, Jesus did not retaliate, did not act for himself, did not waver from his commitment to the Father. Love was his motive throughout, thus death was his end. Only the one who died in this way can bring eternal life. The resurrected one who has passed beyond death does what only God can do: offer the life of the kingdom, a life that transcends the sin of the world and is therefore truly human.

Importantly, then, the resurrection is not a triumphant vindication, not an event that wipes clean the slate of Jesus' history. Construing the resurrection

[48] Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, p. 70.
[49] Williams, *Christ on Trial*, p. 7.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930616000028 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in this manner would bankrupt its salvific power. For Williams, overly triumphant theologies of the resurrection must be led out of their 'infantile transcendentalism' and 'into the faith of Jesus crucified'.[50] Williams would remind those who easily worship the resurrected Christ that the *crucified one* has been raised. Thus the issue is not merely that Williams lacks an account of the exalted Christ, as Webster suggests, but that for Williams (here borrowing Barth's language) the ascended one 'does not encounter man in a splendour which wins him easily and impresses him naturally. Raised from the dead by the power of God, He encounters him in the despicable and forbidding form of the Slain and Crucified of Golgotha.'[51]

Nor is Williams' christology 'lower' than Webster's. On the contrary, Williams claims that as cosmic christological language appears in the New Testament, so too, proportionally, 'does the sense of wonder at the scale of humility and poverty involved in Jesus' life and death'.[52] For Williams, christology can get no higher than the cross, which means that the cross stands as the test of all ecclesial language and action. 'The resurrection ... directs us to Calvary as an event which uncovers the truth; the resilient, inexhaustible, demanding objectivity of what God and God's work is like. From now on, all that can be said of God's action in the past or present must pass under the judgment of this fact.'[53]

Webster's critique reconsidered

We can now draw our threads together. The risen Jesus indeed acts in the church's reading of scripture, but he acts as the crucified one who brings the good news of judgement, the good news that the world's normal way of being human is not the way God intends, and that another humanity is possible. Thus the issue is not that Jesus' agency is slender, but that his agency is cruciform. The word he speaks is not characterised by utter clarity and transparency but by the difficult invitation to repentance, conversion and growth. Because of the nature of this Christ and the salvation he provides, the generative moment of revelation through the text sets one on a process (or aids one along in it) of learning and growing to find a place in the story, learning to be human in light of God's paradoxical presence in the crucified one.[54]

[50] Williams, 'Word and Spirit', p. 125.

[51] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), p. 377.

[52] Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, p. 20.

[53] Ibid., p. 15.

[54] For the notion of revelation as 'generative', see Rowan Williams, 'Trinity and Revelation', in *On Christian Theology*, pp. 131–47.

Webster is right, then, in suggesting that Williams' reading defers meaning and that clarity comes only in the eschaton. But as we've seen, Williams is equally clear that Jesus indeed becomes present to the church in its reading of scripture now. Williams may defer meaning, but not the risen Lord. This explanation won't satisfy Webster, of course, for whom the triumphantly reigning Christ speaks his word eloquently and radiantly. For Webster, the voice of Jesus through the text is itself the event that establishes meaning. For Williams, on the other hand, Jesus' gracious presence is both a moment of lucidity and an event of crisis, a darkening, a judgement. As such, it's also an invitation. Deferral is necessary, therefore, because repentance, conversion and growth will always mark one's effort to live into Christ's invitation. So for Williams, the deferral of meaning and the presence of Christ coincide. What else should one expect from the presence of the crucified one?

Importantly, while resisting easy textual transparency, Williams doesn't dispense with the notion of transparency altogether. He asks of his own spirituality: 'I want to know how my human and historical being, enacting itself through the negotiations of all sorts of varied desires and projects, may become transparent to Jesus, a sign of the kingdom.'[55] Scripture becomes transparent for Williams not merely when Christ speaks through it, but when Christ, by means of the text, forms a community patterned after his cruciform love.

In terms of Williams' scriptural hermeneutic, Jesus' invitation to the new humanity of the kingdom requires the church to employ critical and analogical skills as a means of reading toward this end. These three hermeneutical skills – we can perhaps think of them as habits that mark the faithful Christian life – cannot exist in abstraction from each other.[56] The church patiently follows the text as it converges on Christ, opens itself to being seen and judged by him, and responds to his judgement by living into the salvation he offers. This, for Williams, is what it means to read scripture well.

Ultimately what Webster wants is not merely for Williams to grant more direct agency to Christ; he wants a different understanding of the person

[55] Rowan Williams, 'Knowing Myself in Christ', in Timothy Bradshaw (ed.), *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), p. 18.

[56] For a recent take on Williams' theological habits, see Medi Volpe, '"Taking Time" and "Making Sense": Rowan Williams on the Habits of Theological Imagination', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, article online posting date: 24 Mar. 2013. DOI:10.1111/ijst.12004. While congenial to Williams' theology, Volpe helpfully questions whether Williams assumes the importance of Christian habits without 'describing a process of formation that might cultivate these habits' (p. 11).

of Christ, the Triune God this Christ reveals and the new humanity this Christ forms around himself. The issue is not merely whether the text is determinate or indeterminate, but whether textual meaning corresponds to scripture's subject matter.

Williams reminds the church that the resurrected one who graciously makes himself present to the church is the one with scars in his hands and a hole in his side. If *this* is what God's love looks like when translated into creaturely form, if *this* is what it looks like when God's kingdom comes, what should one expect from God's word to his people? In response to Webster, Williams would likely reply that, if divine intentionality entails the risk of being rejected and killed at the hands of humans as a means of loving them, why should one suspect that this God's intentionality in scripture will transcend polyphony and conflict?

Obviously much more could be said about Webster's theological hermeneutic than an article like this allows. It has much to commend it, not least being the rigor with which Webster grounds bibliology in the doctrine of God. I hope to have shown, however, that Williams' theology of scripture and accompanying hermeneutic is as theologically robust as that of those who criticise him. Williams recognises that what we claim about divine being and action will control how we understand the nature of scripture, scriptural hermeneutics and scripture's functions within the church. Webster's own constructive work clearly evidences the same recognition, even though his analysis of Williams fails to account fully for the place of the cross.

In the midst of a proliferation of 'theological interpretations' of scripture within contemporary theology and the accompanying criticism and debate, it is important to keep in mind the specifically theological nature of the commitments that shape one's hermeneutic. How can one evaluate the mode of Christ's presence in and through the texts of scripture without paying close attention to the nature of this Christ and the divine life he incarnates? In order for debate about theological hermeneutics to be as fruitful as possible, it mustn't hesitate to take the conversation to this level. When we do this with Williams, we see a distinctly theological interpretation that at once takes historical criticism, scriptural narrative and the presence of Christ with utmost seriousness. In the midst of contemporary interpretive schools that tend to prioritise one of these over the others, Williams' unique focus on the cross allows him to hold them together, and in this to offer a theologically rich hermeneutic.